

Christian-Muslim Relations A Bibliographical History

Volume 15. Thematic Essays
(600-1600)

Edited by
Douglas Pratt and Charles Tieszen

with David Thomas and John Chesworth



BRILL

LEIDEN • BOSTON
2020

CONTENTS

Foreword	vii
Editors' Preface	xii
Abbreviations	xiv
Contributor Notes	xv
1 Introduction. <i>Douglas Pratt and Charles Tieszen</i>	1
2 Relational dynamics in the first millennium. A thematic analysis. <i>Douglas Pratt</i>	23
3 Encounter and inquiry. Trajectories of interaction. <i>David Bertaina</i>	53
4 Christians, Muslims and the True Religion. <i>Mark N. Swanson</i>	73
5 Debating the concept of God. <i>I. Mark Beaumont</i>	99
6 Muslim perceptions of Jesus. <i>Mourad Takawi and Gabriel Said Reynolds</i>	123
7 Christian perceptions of Muḥammad. <i>Clinton Bennett</i>	153
8 Defending the faith. Lines of apology. <i>Sandra Toenies Keating</i>	181
9 Muslims engaging the Bible. <i>Ayşe İçöz</i>	207
10 Latin Christianity engaging with the Qur'an. <i>Ulisce Cecini</i>	227
11 'Our Friendly Strife'. Eastern Christianity engaging the Qur'an. <i>Gordon Nickel</i>	255

12	The crusades to the eastern Mediterranean, 1095-1291. <i>Nicholas Morton</i>	281
13	Conduits of interaction. The Andalusí experience. <i>Juan Pedro Monferrer Sala</i>	307
14	Interactions in the early Ottoman period (1299-1518). <i>Tom Papademetriou</i>	331
15	Muslim rulers, Christian subjects. <i>Luke Yarbrough</i>	359
16	Martyrdom and conversion. <i>Christian C. Sahner</i>	389
17	Muslim and Christian apocalypticism. Playing off each other. <i>David Bryan Cook</i>	413
18	Conflict, conquest and reconquest. Arabian and Iberian experience. <i>James Harry Morris</i>	435
19	Christian missions to Muslims. <i>Martha T. Frederiks</i>	461
20	Discussing religious practices. <i>Charles Tieszen</i>	489
	Bibliography	515
	Index of <i>CMR</i> References	559
	Index	571

Chapter 11

‘Our Friendly Strife’. Eastern Christianity engaging the Qur’an

Gordon Nickel

Introduction

The engagement of Eastern Christianity with the Qur’an in the earliest centuries of Islam is distinguished from that of its Latin counterpart by virtue of developing within an empire that was dedicated to the propagation and defence of a new religion. Assuming that the available documents give us a representative picture of that engagement, these particular circumstances drew out of Eastern Christians new ways of thinking about and expressing their own faith, as well as responding to the claims of a conquering Arab power. They could hardly have anticipated the cataclysmic circumstances that would require new thoughts and expressions.

In the year 691, the Umayyad Caliph ‘Abd al-Malik (r. 685-705) constructed a beautiful building on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, thereby announcing to the region, with a flourish, that a new ruling regime and a new religion had come to stay. Along the top of both sides of the outermost galleries within this octagonal building, known as the Dome of the Rock, the caliph had inscribed in mosaic a 240-metre line of Kufic Arabic script. The contents of the text are remarkable for the high proportion that addresses Christian beliefs.

Jerusalem was ‘the Christian city par excellence’ when the second caliph, ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb (r. 634-44), and his troops had first arrived in 638.¹ Its Church of the Holy Sepulchre was considered one of the wonders of the world at the time. Just over 50 years later, the Dome of the Rock, constructed in the style of an Eastern church and placed on the most prominent platform in the city, was competing for attention with the older Christian buildings. Inside, the inscriptions along its spacious colonnades directly addressed ‘the people of the book’ with the words,

¹ O. Grabar, *The shape of the holy. Early Islamic Jerusalem*, Princeton NJ, 1996, p. 63.

'Do not go beyond the limits in your religion and do not say about Allāh but the truth.' Some 175 out of a total of 370 words in the inscription concern the identity of Jesus, here called 'Īsā. Interspersed with words about 'Īsā are claims for a new name, 'the messenger of Allāh'.²

The walled city of Jerusalem in the late 7th century, and for many centuries since, can be seen as an intriguing picture of Eastern Christian engagement with the Qur'an. The text and challenges of the Qur'an came to Christians from outside of their familiar world, from an alien conquering power. Christians were not generally the ones who brought theological challenges to their new rulers, but rather were themselves challenged by their rulers to respond to new religious claims.

Eastern Christians continued their lives among the Muslims who brought the challenges. This led to face-to-face encounters and authentic interfaith conversation. At the same time, the playing field was not level. The conversation was between conqueror and conquered, and the restrictions imposed on Christian expression could change according to the whims of whichever caliph was ruling. Eastern Christians did not have the freedom of Latin Christians to say and write whatever they thought about the Qur'an.

Christians who wanted to respond effectively to the Muslim challenges would need to do so in what for many was a new language – although there were substantial numbers of native Arabic speakers in parts of the pre-Islamic Christian East. Like the inscriptions in the Dome of the Rock, Muslim challenges that came in Arabic needed to be deciphered and understood before Christians could compose a response. At their best, Eastern Christians not only learned to comprehend and engage with the contents of the Qur'an, but those whose first language was Arabic were able to turn the spotlight towards the literary style of the Qur'an and the claims that Muslims made for it. They needed to learn to fashion their responses in the terms of the Muslim societies in which they lived and take into account the constraints these imposed. These are some of the circumstances that distinguish Eastern Christian engagement with the Qur'an from the treatment of the Qur'an in Latin Christianity. Knowing the context for Eastern engagement should help us to appreciate it more fully and not to judge it inappropriately according to the standards of other times and places.

² Grabar, *Shape of the holy*, pp. 59-61.

Relevant documents

Examples of Eastern Christian engagement with the Qur'an come from a variety of documents, from the earliest centuries of Islam. Their authors express themselves in Greek, Syriac, Coptic, Armenian and Arabic, and there are striking differences in how directly they write or speak as well as in the extent of their knowledge about the Qur'an.

This essay will frequently mention the *Risāla* of al-Kindī³ because it shows the most extensive range and depth of engagement with the Qur'an of all existing records from early Eastern Christianity. It was written sometime in the mid-9th century by an anonymous Christian purporting to report an exchange of letters between the Muslim 'Abd Allāh ibn Ishāq al-Hāshimī, who sets out the superior advantages of Islam and calls his correspondent to convert, and a much longer response from the Christian 'Abd al-Masīḥ al-Kindī, who explains why he finds Islam inferior to his own faith. In addition to its engagement with many qur'anic passages that are also treated by other Christian authors, this Christian letter is unique in its prescient investigation of the claims that the Qur'an makes for itself, and it also presents an extensive section on the development of the Qur'an in history, a passage that prompted Sidney Griffith to write in 1983, 'Unfortunately, thus far little scholarly attention has been paid to this valuable ninth century discussion of such an important issue.'⁴ Actually, this discussion has been noted with interest by scholars of qur'anic studies and the origins of Islam for more than a hundred years. Fortunately, in recent years that discussion has received more attention from scholars of Christian-Muslim relations.

The title of this essay, 'our friendly strife', indeed comes from al-Kindī's *Risāla*. The author offers this surprising expression at the end of the long and lively response to the Muslim interlocutor's summons to him to 'wage war in the way of Allāh'.⁵ Al-Kindī's vigorous advocacy in the opposite direction, the way of 'the Messiah, the Saviour of the world', is

³ L. Bottini, *The Apology of al-Kindī*, in *CMR* 1, 585-94.

⁴ S.H. Griffith, 'The Prophet Muḥammad, his scripture and his message according to Christian apologies in Arabic and Syriac from the first Abbasid century', in G. Monnot (ed.), *La vie du Prophète Mahomet. Colloque de Strasbourg (octobre 1980)*, Paris, 1983, 99-146, p. 144.

⁵ A. Tien (trans.), 'The Apology of al-Kindī', in N.A. Newman (ed.), *The early Christian-Muslim dialogue. A collection of documents from the first three Islamic centuries (632-900 AD)*, Hatfield PA, 1993, 365-545, p. 391 (summons from al-Hāshimī), pp. 478-86 (response from al-Kindī); W. Muir, *The Apology of al Kindi, written at the court of al Māmūn (A.H. 215, A.D. 830), in defence of Christianity against Islam*, London, 1882 (partial trans.), pp. 40-8.

straightforward and unapologetic, and yet he is able to ask his opponent to let reason – 'impartial and incorruptible reason' – be their umpire in the debate.⁶ The concept of peaceful debate may appear counter-intuitive in circles where debate itself is anathema. For Christians living in the midst of Muslim-majority societies, however, the concept may not seem so strange.

Variety of approaches and strategies

Among the approaches to the Qur'an by Eastern Christians were several that made use of the Qur'an itself, sometimes extensively, but that arguably did not engage with the Qur'an in regard to its challenging perspectives on Christian beliefs. One approach was to say that the text of the Qur'an came originally from a Christian monk named Baḥīrā who taught Muḥammad. One Arabic version of this story, probably from the 9th century, quotes around 40 verses from the Qur'an.⁷ The unknown author of this version makes extensive use of apparently 'pro-Christian' verses (such as Q 10:94 and 5:82), comments on a small number of anti-Christian verses, then interprets 'neutral' verses in such a way that they seem to come from a Christian source. Verses that are undeniably anti-Christian are explained as later corruptions of the original text composed by Muḥammad. The goal of the story is to argue that the Qur'an confirms Christian beliefs, and therefore to plead that Muslims should not attack Christians for their beliefs.⁸

A second approach was to argue that, while for the most part the Qur'an affirms Christian beliefs, it is simply not relevant to Christians because it is for the Arabs alone. The strategy of Paul of Antioch's *Risāla ilā ba'ḍ aṣḍiqā'ihi alladhīna bi-ṣaydā min al-Muslimīn* ('Letter to a Muslim friend in Sidon'), written in Arabic by the Melkite Bishop Paul of Sidon sometime around the year 1200, includes the comparatively rare Christian acceptance that Muḥammad was sent, and the Qur'an was revealed, by God,⁹ but that the Qur'an was given in Arabic specifically for the pagan Arabs, and that it can only be fully understood when read

⁶ Tien, 'Apology of al-Kindī', p. 486.

⁷ B. Roggema, 'A Christian reading of the Qur'an. The Legend of Sergius-Baḥīrā and its use of Qur'an and Sīra', in D. Thomas (ed.), *Syrian Christians under Islam. The first thousand years*, Leiden, 2001, 57-74, p. 58. See also, B. Roggema, 'The Legend of Sergius Baḥīrā', in *CMR* 1, 600-3.

⁸ Roggema, 'Christian reading of the Qur'an', p. 70.

⁹ See D. Thomas, 'Paul of Antioch', in *CMR* 4, 78-82.

in line with the Bible. His subtle interpretations of verses about Jesus create the impression that, 'if read judiciously and with Christian intentions, the Qur'an can be seen to support Christian doctrines'.¹⁰ Paul of Antioch's approach was substantially picked up a century later in the early 14th century in the anonymous *Risāla min ahl jazīrat Qubruş* ('The letter from the people of Cyprus').¹¹

Differing from the approaches in these two letters written at the time of the crusades, but like them declining to criticise the Qur'an openly, is the document known as *Fī tathlīth Allāh al-wahīd* ('On the triune nature of God'), from the 8th century.¹² This has been praised for its use of qur'anic language to explain the identity of Jesus in a Muslim context,¹³ though its references to the contents of the Qur'an are light and suggestive in a peculiar way. For example, after a detailed proclamation of the deity of Jesus, the author writes, 'You will find all this about the Messiah in your book.'¹⁴ This claim seems to show either an unaccountably sanguine approach to the qur'anic teaching on ʿĪsā, or an assumption that Muslims do not know the Qur'an well.

The qur'anic materials most often engaged by Eastern Christians were the verses in the Qur'an about Jesus, where he is named ʿĪsā. Some responses show knowledge of the wording of the verses themselves, while others may deal with the arguments of the verses as heard in inter-faith conversation. In some cases, Christians sought to take advantage of actual teachings in the Qur'an in order to present their faith, while in others Christians needed to answer strong claims that their Muslim opponents anchored confidently in the Qur'an. In addition to defending

¹⁰ D. Thomas, 'Paul of Antioch's *Letter to a Muslim Friend* and *The Letter from Cyprus*', in D. Thomas (ed.), *Syrian Christians under Islam. The first thousand years*, Leiden, 2001, 203-21, p. 211.

¹¹ R.Y. Ebied and D. Thomas (ed. and trans.), *Muslim-Christian polemic during the crusades. The letter from the people of Cyprus and Ibn Abī Ṭālib al-Dīmashqī's response*, Leiden, 2005. See also D. Thomas, 'The letter from the people of Cyprus', in *CMR* 4, 769-72.

¹² M.D. Gibson (ed. and trans.), *An Arabic version of the Acts of the Apostles and the seven Catholic Epistles from an eighth or ninth century MS. in the Convent of St. Katherine on Mount Sinai, with a treatise on the triune nature of God, and translation from the same codex*, Cambridge, 1899. See also S.K. Samir, 'The earliest Arab apology for Christianity', in S.K. Samir and J.S. Nielsen (eds), *Christian Arabic apologetics during the Abbasid period (750-1258)*, Leiden, 1994, 57-114; M.N. Swanson, 'Fī tathlīth Allāh al-wāḥid', in *CMR* 1, 330-3.

¹³ M.N. Swanson, 'Beyond proof-texting. Approaches to the Qur'an in some early Arabic Christian apologies', *The Muslim World* 88 (1998) 297-319; S. Griffith, 'The Qur'an in Christian Arabic literature. A cursory overview', in I.M. Beaumont (ed.), *Arab Christians and the Qur'an from the origins of Islam to the medieval period*, Leiden, 2018, 1-19, pp. 5-8.

¹⁴ Gibson, *An Arabic version of the Acts of the Apostles*, p. 12.

their own faith in the face of qur'anic denials, Christians were sometimes summoned to respond to qur'anic claims for the Qur'an, its messenger and Islam.

The death of Jesus

According to the earliest available documents, Christians quickly became familiar with the Muslim denial of the death of Jesus. Writing in the mid-8th century, John of Damascus, who functioned as an official under the Umayyad caliphs before withdrawing to the monastic life, notes this denial in chapter 100 of his *Peri haeresiōn* ('On heresies') in words that summarise Q 4:157-8: '[...] the Christ was not crucified, nor did he die; for God took him into heaven unto Himself [...]'.¹⁵ John does not respond to the denial, except to write that 'all the prophets' foretold the death and resurrection of Jesus.¹⁶

Some writers sought to respond to the Qur'an's assertion that the Jews lied when they claimed to have killed the Messiah by saying that the assertion was partly true. The 9th-century Jacobite Abū Rā'iṭa, for example, argues that the Jews lied when they claimed to have killed the divine nature of the Messiah, although they did indeed kill his human nature.¹⁷ The 9th-century Nestorian 'Ammār al-Baṣrī takes a different approach, engaging the Muslim accusation that belief in the crucifixion of the Messiah imputes weakness to God or humiliation to the Messiah. John the Baptist was beheaded, asks 'Ammār rhetorically, so why then should Muslims be offended that Jesus also met a humiliating end?¹⁸

In his well-known dialogue with the 'Abbasid Caliph al-Mahdī (r. 775-85), the Nestorian Patriarch Timothy I confesses the redemptive significance of the death of Jesus and especially the demonstration of the love of God in 'the death in the flesh' of his beloved Son.¹⁹ In response, the

¹⁵ D.J. Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam. The 'heresy of the Ishmaelites'*, Leiden, 1972, p. 132. See also R.F. Gleib, 'John of Damascus', in *CMR* 1, 295-301.

¹⁶ Sahas, *John of Damascus*, p. 136.

¹⁷ I.M. Beaumont, 'Early Christian interpretation of the Qur'an', *Transformation* 22 (2005) 195-203, p. 201. See also S.T. Keating, 'Abū Rā'iṭa l-Takrītī', in *CMR* 1, 567-81; S.T. Keating, 'On the Incarnation', in *CMR* 1, 574-5.

¹⁸ I.M. Beaumont, 'Ammār al-Baṣrī. Ninth century Christian theology and qur'anic presuppositions', in I.M. Beaumont (ed.), *Arab Christians and the Qur'an from the origins of Islam to the medieval period*, Leiden, 2018, 83-105, pp. 99-101. See also M. Beaumont, 'Ammār al-Baṣrī', in *CMR* 1, 604-10.

¹⁹ A. Mingana (trans.), 'The apology of Timothy the Patriarch before the Caliph Mahdī', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 12 (1929) 137-226, p. 176. See also

caliph denies Jesus' death by quoting Q 4:157, to which Timothy argues that, on the contrary, the Qur'an bears witness to Jesus' death, making his point by quoting Q 19:33, where Jesus says, 'Peace be upon me the day I was born, and the day I die, and the day I am raised up alive.' Timothy notes that the sequence of verbs here follows the order of the Gospel accounts, and Jesus cannot be 'raised up alive' unless he first dies.

Timothy also quotes Q 3:55, 'When God said, "Jesus I will cause you to die (*mutawaffika*) and will raise you to me."' Again, the sequence of verbs follows the Gospel order, but here Timothy faces a challenge in the Arabic text. The verb *tawaffā* is most naturally translated as 'cause to die', and in most occurrences in the Qur'an that are not related to Jesus it is habitually translated this way. With the two occurrences of the verb that are connected with Jesus (Q 3:55; 5:117), however, both Muslim commentators and translators were (and still are) accustomed to render it in ways not related to death (e.g. 'take', Yusuf Ali; 'gather', Pickthall).

Timothy also makes the case for the death of Christ from several other angles. It was appropriate, he says, because without it people would have no sign to assure them of eternal life. Furthermore, both the death and resurrection of Jesus were witnessed publicly, so that all people could enjoy the expectation of everlasting life and the world to come. He adds that the Muslim claim that Allāh deceived the witnesses of the crucifixion by making another person look like ʿĪsā (a frequent interpretation of Q 3:54; see 4:157) is 'entirely unfitting' for God.²⁰ This argument, which was developed further by later Christian apologists, may have produced echoes in Muslim writings such as the Qur'an commentary of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (1149-1210), where he says that the idea of throwing the witnesses of the crucifixion into confusion and ignorance 'is not worthy of the wisdom of God'.²¹

M. Heimgartner, 'Timothy I', in *CMR* 1, 515-19, and also pp. 522-6 on Letter 59, which contains the Syriac text of Timothy's account of the debate.

²⁰ M.N. Swanson, 'Folly to the *ḥunafā*'. The crucifixion in early Christian-Muslim controversy', in E. Grypeou, M. Swanson and D. Thomas (eds), *The encounter of Eastern Christianity with early Islam*, Leiden, 2006, 237-56, pp. 248-55.

²¹ G. Nickel, "'Self-evident truths of reason'. Challenges to clear thinking in the *Tafsīr al-kabīr* of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī', *ICMR* 22 (2011) 161-72, pp. 166-7.

The deity of Jesus

The Arabic message above the galleries within the Dome of the Rock does not touch on the death of Jesus but chooses instead the deity of Jesus as its central theme. The longest units of text in the inscription target the Christian confession that Jesus is the Son of God, and along with that belief in the Trinity.²² In the Qur'an as well, it is the deity of Jesus that draws the strongest denials and arguably the harshest tone.²³ Correspondingly, a large part of the apologetic responses and debates from Eastern Christian pens strive to make a case for the Trinity and for the deity of Jesus.

The most common text from the Qur'an to spark Eastern Christian reaction to the qur'anic denials was Q 4:171,²⁴ the words of which also appear on the inner face of the Dome's colonnades. In order to appreciate the Christian reaction in full, it is important to note that the challenge came to Eastern Christians, probably for the first time, in the form of a command to a subject population under Arab military occupation. Q 4:171 is actually a collection of affirmations and denials, and Eastern Christian writings sought both to answer the denials and take advantage of the apparent affirmations. It commands Christians not to say about Allāh anything 'except the truth'. The concern is explicitly theological, and the epistemology is traditional. The verse then immediately brings forward 'the Messiah, 'Īsā son of Mary': he was only a messenger of Allāh. 'Do not say "three"', the verse continues. Far be it from Allāh 'that he should have a son'.

In the extensive explanations that Eastern Christians composed to try to make a case before Muslims for the Trinity and the divine sonship of Jesus,²⁵ they made use of the first part of this verse, which they found supported their claim. Here, 'Īsā is also called '[Allāh's] word which he cast into Mary, and a spirit from him'. Eastern Christians learned to use this apparent reference to the three Persons of the triune Godhead,

²² Grabar, *Shape of the holy*, pp. 59-61.

²³ G. Nickel, 'Jesus', in A. Rippin and J. Mojaddedi (eds), *The Wiley Blackwell companion to the Qur'an*, Oxford, 2017, 288-302, pp. 291-4.

²⁴ Beaumont, 'Early Christian interpretation', pp. 199-200.

²⁵ E.g. Mingana, 'Apology of Timothy', pp. 153-63, 199-215; Tien, 'Apology of al-Kindi', pp. 412-25; A. Jeffery, 'Ghevond's text of the correspondence between 'Umar II and Leo III', *Harvard Theological Review* 37 (1944) 269-332, pp. 300-19.

Allāh, his Word, and his Spirit, from as early as John of Damascus and *Fī tathlīth Allāh al-wāḥid* in the mid-8th century.²⁶

Of the few direct quotations from the Qur'an that appear in *Fī tathlīth Allāh al-wāḥid*, one verse is used to support the anonymous author's affirmation of the deity of Jesus as it is demonstrated in his miracles. He argues: 'The Messiah created (*khalaqa*), and no one creates but God. You will find in the Qur'an [the words of Jesus], "I shall create (*akhluqu*) for you the form of a bird from clay. Then I will breathe into it and it will become a bird by the permission of Allāh"' (Q 3:49, cf. 5:110). The author's point is that, elsewhere in the Qur'an, there are 171 occurrences of forms of the verb *khalaqa* in the active voice. The subject of 162 of these is Allāh, and in the remaining verses the verb is used mockingly in relation to false claims made for pagan deities or humans.²⁷ Perhaps sensing the implications of this (or possibly in response to Eastern Christians), Muslim commentators found ways to interpret *khalaqa* here with other words (and the practice continues today in most Muslim translations of the Qur'an into English, e.g. 'fashion', Pickthall, 'determine', Shakir).

In his brief chapter in *Peri haeresiōn* devoted to the group he calls the Ishmaelites, John of Damascus remarks on their accusation that Christians are 'associators', because when Christians say the Messiah is the Son of God and God, they introduce an associate alongside the one God.²⁸ It would have been very important for Christians living within the Islamic Empire to reject this term, which in John's Greek must represent the Arabic *mushrikūn* (derived from the verb *ashraka*, 'to make a partner', 'to associate'), because the Qur'an contains very threatening verses about the treatment of *mushrikūn* (e.g. Q 4:48; 9:5, 36, 113).²⁹ Interestingly, the outer face of the inscriptions within the Dome includes the words 'Praise to Allāh who has not taken a son, nor has he any associate (*sharīk*) in the kingdom'; and above the north door of the Dome appear the words, 'Muḥammad is the servant of Allāh and his apostle, whom he sent with the guidance and the religion of truth so that he may cause it to prevail over religion – all of it – even though the associators (*mushrikūn*) dislike (it)'.³⁰

²⁶ Sahas, *John of Damascus*, p. 137; Gibson, *An Arabic version of the Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 2–36.

²⁷ Nickel, 'Jesus', p. 296.

²⁸ Sahas, *John of Damascus*, pp. 134–7.

²⁹ Roggema, 'Christian reading of the Qur'an', p. 59. See also G. Hawting, art. 'Idolatry and idolaters', in *EQ*.

³⁰ Grabar, *Shape of the holy*, pp. 59, 61.

In response, John notes that Muslims agree that Christ is word and spirit of God (following this with Q 4:171), and goes on to argue that 'the word and the spirit are inseparable from the one in whom they are by nature'. That is, as attributes, they must be intrinsic constituents of the being that possesses them. Where Muslims falsely call Christians 'associators', John argues, in reply 'we call you mutilators of God'.³¹ For John is implying that, in their concern to preserve the unity of God, Muslims implicitly deny the reality of any of God's attributes, including 'word of God' on the basis they might be understood to exist independently of the essence or being of God. The word of God (Christ) is thus not a separate entity to be associated, or not, with Allah; it is a necessary attribute or element of the divine being.

Accusations against the Bible

Writings from Eastern Christian authors also deal extensively with Muslim accusations against the Bible. The qur'anic materials that may support such accusations are sometimes assumed to be the series of verses that use the verbs *baddala* and *ḥarrafa*, or perhaps the 'woe' pronounced upon 'those who write the book with their hands (Q 2:79). However, the writings of Eastern Christians do not seem to mention any of the 'tampering' verses that are often cited in Muslim polemic,³² whether Christian writers knew these verses or not. Rather, the qur'anic material with which Eastern Christians most needed to engage were the claims in the Qur'an that the '*ummī* prophet (Q 7:157) or *aḥmad* (a possible synonym for the name Muḥammad, Q 61:6) is referred to in the Torah and the Gospel.³³ In the dialogue between Patriarch Timothy and al-Mahdī, the caliph asks Timothy, 'How is it that [...] you do not accept Muḥammad from the testimony of the Messiah and the Gospel?'³⁴ No matter how reasonably, and patiently, Timothy presents his answer, the caliph keeps coming back to the same question. Timothy replies firmly, 'So far as Muḥammad is concerned I have not received a single testimony either from Jesus the Messiah or from the Gospel which would refer to his name or to his

³¹ Sahas, *John of Damascus*, p. 137.

³² See G. Nickel, *Narratives of tampering in the earliest commentaries on the Qur'an*, Leiden, 2011, pp. 26-9.

³³ G. Nickel, "They find him written with them". The impact of Q 7:157 on Muslim interaction with Arab Christianity', in I.M. Beaumont (ed.), *Arab Christians and the Qur'an from the origins of Islam to the medieval period*, Leiden, 2018, 106-30.

³⁴ Mingana, 'Apology of Timothy', p. 168.

works.³⁵ Finally the caliph insists, ‘There were many testimonies but the books have been corrupted, and you have removed them.’³⁶ If Timothy’s dialogue is representative of a general trend, then Muslim accusations against the Bible may be seen as a function of an apologetic requirement to claim attestation for Muḥammad in the earlier scriptures.³⁷

Eastern Christians made great efforts to answer Muslim accusations of falsification of the Bible, partly because, as a *dhimmī* population within the Islamic empire, they had no other authority than the Word of God. Writers demonstrated remarkable ingenuity in defending the Bible against this attack,³⁸ and sometimes it was Jewish scholars, fellow *dhimmīs* with Eastern Christians, who supplied the strongest answers.³⁹ In constructing their answers Christians sometimes appealed to verses in the Qur’an that show a positive and respectful view of the Bible.⁴⁰

Christian and Jewish engagement with Muslim accusations against the Bible seems to have caught the attention of some Muslims, if al-Rāzī’s exegesis of Q 3:78, 4:46, 5:13, and 6:91 is any indication. Al-Rāzī concedes the points of faithful transmission and dissemination of the Torah, concluding that ‘it is impossible to introduce additions or omissions’ to such a holy text that has been faithfully preserved in its original form. On this point, al-Rāzī seemed to allow to the Torah the same claim to the guarantee of preservation through time that he makes for the Qur’an.⁴¹ In general, however, and despite the best efforts of Eastern Christians, the accusation of biblical falsification continued to be extremely popular in Muslim polemic, probably because the accusation made it so easy to rebuff any arguments based on the Bible.⁴² There seems to be an almost-audible groan of frustration on the part of al-Kindī in his *Risāla* when he says to his Muslim correspondent: ‘You escape the inference on the

³⁵ Mingana, ‘Apology of Timothy’, p. 169.

³⁶ Mingana, ‘Apology of Timothy’, p. 171.

³⁷ Nickel, “‘They find him written with them’”, pp. 128-9.

³⁸ G. Nickel, *The gentle answer to the Muslim accusation of biblical falsification*, Calgary, 2015, pp. 117-20. See also I.M. Beaumont, ‘Ammār al-Baṣrī on the alleged corruption of the gospels’, in D. Thomas (ed.), *The Bible in Arab Christianity*, Leiden, 2007, 241-55; S. Toenies Keating, ‘Refuting the charge of *tahrīf*: Abū Rā’īṭah (d. c. 835 CE) and his first *risāla* on the Holy Trinity’, in S. Günther (ed.), *Ideas, images, and methods of portrayal. Insight into classical Arabic literature and Islam*, Leiden 2005, 41-57. On this text, see S. T. Keating, ‘On the Trinity’, in *CMR* 1, 572-4.

³⁹ Nickel, *Gentle answer*, pp. 120-4.

⁴⁰ For example, Q 10:94, in Tien, ‘Apology of al-Kindī’, pp. 498-9.

⁴¹ Nickel, “‘Self-evident truths of reason’”, pp. 164-5; Nickel, *Gentle answer*, pp. 52-3.

⁴² W.M. Watt, *Muslim-Christian encounters. Perceptions and misperceptions*, London, 1991, p. 30.

plea that the text has been corrupted, so that you can apply your favourite argument and shelter behind it. I do not know that I have found an argument more difficult to dislodge, more desperate to disarm than this which you advance as to the corruption of the sacred text.'⁴³

The Qur'an supported by miracle?

Another area of Eastern Christian engagement with the Qur'an surrounded the question of whether Muḥammad performed miracles. Eastern Christians must have become familiar with the idea that, according to the Qur'an, he did not, because a number of writers quoted verses such as Q 6:109, 17:59, and 17:90 to back their questions.⁴⁴ These verses are part of a longer series in which the audience asks for 'signs' (*āyāt*) but none are given (also Q 13:7, 27; 20:133; 29:50; 43:40). They say, "We shall not believe you [Muḥammad] until you cause a spring to gush forth for us from the earth[...]"', runs one such scene (Q 17:90). Within the early Islamic empire, both Jews and Christians began to ask the conquerors whether the new teaching was backed up by divine signs.⁴⁵ They argued that, just as the authority of the Torah is supported by the miracles of Moses, and the Gospel by the miracles of Jesus, so the Qur'an requires the attestation of miracles by its messenger.⁴⁶

The morality of the Qur'an

Eastern Christian writers raised matters of morality in the Qur'an about which they had either read or heard. For example, John of Damascus mentions the Qur'an's teaching on divorce, referring to Q 4 (*al-Nisā'*, 'Women'; he calls it *Hē graphē tēs gynaikós*, 'The discourse of the woman'),

⁴³ Tien, 'Apology of al-Kindi', p. 498.

⁴⁴ Griffith, 'Prophet Muhammad, his scripture and his message', p. 145; Roggema, 'Christian reading of the Qur'an', p. 66; Beaumont, 'Early Christian interpretation', pp. 197-8 ('Ammār al-Baṣrī').

⁴⁵ S. Stroumsa, 'The signs of prophecy. The emergence and early development of a theme in Arabic theological literature', *Harvard Theological Review* 78 (1985) 101-14, pp. 105, 109. A Jewish writer who asked this question was the 13th century Jewish philosopher, Ibn Kammūna. See M. Perlmann (trans.), *Ibn Kammūna's examination of the three faiths. A thirteenth-century essay in the comparative study of religion*, Berkeley CA, 1971, pp. 92-3.

⁴⁶ E.g. Sahas, *John of Damascus*, pp. 156-9, Mingana, 'Apology of Timothy', pp. 172-3; Tien, 'Apology of al-Kindi', p. 439.

which contains much of it.⁴⁷ Al-Kindī's *Risāla* quotes Q 24:11 and comments on 'the affair of 'Ā'isha' – the rumour of a scandal in Muslim tradition according to which Muḥammad's young wife 'Ā'isha was once left behind alone by a Muslim raiding force and reappeared in the camp with a young man.⁴⁸ The anonymous *Disputation of the monk Ibrāhīm al-Ṭabarānī*, thought to have been written in the later 9th century, probes the question of the imputed sinlessness of Muḥammad. A representative Muslim claims that Muḥammad was without sin, though his interlocutor, a monk, denies this, referring for support to Q 48:2, '[...] so that Allāh may forgive you what is past of your sin and what is to come',⁴⁹ one of a number of verses that address this issue (also Q 40:55 and 47:19; cf. 3:147; 4:106; 110:3). The Muslim's claim may indicate the development of the Islamic dogma of prophetic sinlessness or immunity known as *iṣma*.⁵⁰

John of Damascus also refers to the story of Zayd, Muḥammad's adopted son, and his wife Zaynab, in which Zayd divorces Zaynab so that Muḥammad can marry her, in Muslim tradition related to Q 33:36-40. Other writings that mention this story include al-Kindī's *Risāla* and the correspondence between the Byzantine Emperor Leo III (r. 717-41) and the Umayyad Caliph 'Umar II (r. 717-20).⁵¹ John of Damascus shows no awareness of any qur'anic anchor but tells the story along the same general lines as Muslim historians such as Abū Ja'far al-Ṭabarī,⁵² though al-Kindī is able to quote most of Q 33:37-8.⁵³ Zayd's name does indeed appear in Q 33:37, one of very few contemporary names to appear in the Qur'an, but al-Kindī inserts the name Zaynab where the canonical text has simply, '[...] when Zayd had gotten what he needed from her [...]']

Considering these verses, al-Kindī says, 'I have too much respect for the paper on which I write to mention' the story, but says he does so because Q 33:37 claims that Allāh arranged the Prophet's union with the woman ('[...] we married her to you [...]'). In his letter, Leo comments, 'Of all these abominations the worst is that of accusing God of being

⁴⁷ Sahas, *John of Damascus*, pp. 137-8.

⁴⁸ Tien, 'Apology of al-Kindī', p. 433. Cf. A. Guillaume (trans.), *The life of Muhammad. A translation of Ishāq's Sirat rasūl Allāh*, Karachi, 1955, pp. 493-7.

⁴⁹ Beaumont, 'Early Christian interpretation', p. 198. See M.N. Swanson, 'The disputation of the monk Ibrāhīm al-Ṭabarānī', in *CMR* 1, 876-81.

⁵⁰ See T. Andrae, *Die Person Muhammads in Lehre und Glaube seiner Gemeinde*, Stockholm, 1917, pp. 139-45.

⁵¹ T. Greenwood, 'The Letter of Leo III in Ghewond', in *CMR* 1, 203-8. See also, B. Roggema, 'Pseudo-Leo III's first letter to 'Umar II', in *CMR* 1, 375-6; M.N. Swanson, 'The Arabic Letter of Leo III to 'Umar II', in *CMR* 1, 377-80.

⁵² Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk*, Cairo, 1967, vol. 2, pp. 562-4.

⁵³ Tien, 'Apology of al-Kindī', pp. 432-3.

the originator of all these filthy acts [...] Is there indeed a worse blasphemy than that of alleging that God is the cause of all this evil?'⁵⁴ Such Christian engagements with the qur'anic text should not automatically be characterised in the most pejorative terms. This is a Muslim story that was widely retold in early Muslim commentaries on the Qur'an.⁵⁵ The Christian writers said that their main concern was theological. If their concern was rather Muḥammad, however, his behaviour as reported by Muslim tradition is not irrelevant to the evaluation of his claim to prophethood. The story was also of considerable interest within the early Muslim community, writes David Powers, where it raised discomfiture over 'the manner in which God's decree appears to have been designed to satisfy the sexual desires of the Prophet'.⁵⁶

The Qur'an as prophetic *bona fides*

Eastern Christian engagement with moral issues in the Qur'an tends inexorably towards interaction with claims for Muḥammad. Emilio Platti makes the interesting suggestion that al-Kindī wrote about the Qur'an as a way of addressing what for him was the larger question of Muḥammad's prophetic status.⁵⁷ This seems to fit well with the insight of John Wansbrough that a dominant concern of Islam in its formative period was the notion of authority, 'acceptance or rejection on the basis of a scriptural dispensation in the possession of a prophet. In dispute are the authenticity of the former and the qualifications of the latter.'⁵⁸ Wansbrough finds Muslim dogmas about the Qur'an as the word of God as they developed in the third and fourth centuries of Islam to be 'secondary to acceptance of scripture as prophetic *bona fides*'.⁵⁹ In this

⁵⁴ Jeffery, 'Ghevond's text', p. 324.

⁵⁵ G. Nickel, 'Muqātil on Zayd and Zaynab. "The *sunna* of Allāh concerning those who passed away before" (Q 33:38)', in M. Daneshgar and W.A. Saleh (eds), *Islamic studies today. Essays in honor of Andrew Rippin*, Leiden, 2017, 43-61, pp. 46-51; 'Abdallāh Maḥmūd Shihāta (ed.), *Tafsīr Muqātil ibn Sulaymān*, Beirut, 2002, vol. 3, pp. 490-9; *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī musamma Jāmi' al-bayān fī ta'wīl al-qur'ān*, Beirut, 2005, vol. 10, pp. 301-5.

⁵⁶ D.S. Powers, *Muhammad is not the father of any of your men. The making of the last prophet*, Philadelphia PA, 2009, p. 48.

⁵⁷ E. Platti, 'Abd al-Masīḥ al-Kindī on the Qur'an', in I.M. Beaumont (ed.), *Arab Christians and the Qur'an from the origins of Islam to the medieval period*, Leiden, 2018, 66-82, pp. 67-8.

⁵⁸ J. Wansbrough, *The sectarian milieu. Content and composition of Islamic salvation history*, Oxford, 1978, p. 56.

⁵⁹ Wansbrough, *Sectarian milieu*, p. 58.

scenario, the Qur'an serves as proof, or disproof, of Muḥammad's qualifications for prophethood.

The Dome inscriptions bear witness to a development in Muslim veneration for Muḥammad from a very early point in the emergence of Islam. After stating that Allāh does not beget and was not begotten (Q 112:3), the outer face declares that Allāh and his angels pray for the Prophet, and exhorts the believers to pray for the Prophet and greet him.⁶⁰ The same wording appears in Q 33:56. Again on the inner face of the Dome, immediately preceding two long passages on the identity of Jesus, reads 'Muḥammad is the servant of Allāh and his Apostle. Allāh and his angels pray for the prophet. You who believe, pray for him and greet him.'⁶¹ That Allāh would 'pray for', rather than being the object of being 'prayed to', may appear odd, but it is the essential meaning of *Ṣallā Allāhu 'alayhi* and implies a superlative spiritual status imputed to Muḥammad. Questions raised by this include how Eastern Christians engaged this Qur'anic theological claim, and whether this claim made it difficult to even raise the subject of Muḥammad's identity. If the Dome's proclamation about Muḥammad is representative of how challenges from conqueror to conquered may have run in other parts of the Islamic empire, this would presumably have made it very difficult for Eastern Christians to criticise Muḥammad directly.

Platti gives an example of al-Kindī's method of evaluating the status of Muḥammad by discussing 'law'.⁶² He says that there are three kinds of law used in making judgements:⁶³ divine law, the law of nature or justice, and the law of Satan, identifying the last as 'the law of violence' and 'the law your master brought'. The *Risāla* describes the divine law as having been revealed by the Messiah. Al-Kindī quotes the affirmative Q 5:46, 'And in their footsteps we followed up with Jesus, son of Mary, confirming what was with him of the Torah, and as guidance and admonition to the ones who guard themselves.' He immediately joins this to Jesus' command to love one's enemies in Matthew 5:44-5. In describing the law of nature, 'based on reason', al-Kindī quotes Exodus 21:23-4, but further on quotes its apparent echo in Q 5:45, 'the life for the life, and the eye for the eye, and the nose for the nose [...] and the tooth for the tooth'. The second part of this verse is 'but whoever remits it as a freewill offering,

⁶⁰ Grabar, *Shape of the holy*, p. 59.

⁶¹ Grabar, *Shape of the holy*, p. 60.

⁶² Platti, 'Abd al-Masīḥ al-Kindī', pp. 66-8.

⁶³ Tien, 'Apology of al-Kindī', pp. 449-52.

it will be an atonement for him'. Al-Kindī suggests that since the first part of Q 5:45 is the law of nature brought by Moses, and the last part of the verse is the divine law brought by Jesus, there is nothing left for 'your master' to bring but the law of Satan, 'I mean the law of violence, opposed alike to the law of God and contrary to those of nature'.⁶⁴

Elsewhere in the *Risāla*, al-Kindī discusses the teachings in the Qur'an on peace and war more extensively than any other Eastern Christian writer. Though the work is often characterised as hostile towards Islam, the author does not present the long list of commands to fight and kill that are found in the Qur'an as part of his attack, but instead responds to a summons from his Muslim correspondent to 'smite men with the edge of the sword'⁶⁵ by quoting verses from the Qur'an that command or recommend good treatment of non-Muslims (Q 3:104; 2:272; 10:99-100a, 108-9; 11:118-19a).⁶⁶ He is trying to show that these verses contradict the violent summons of his correspondent and, he writes, the conduct of Muḥammad. In this remarkable passage, he pleads for better treatment of Eastern Christians, 'the saints of God, a people who had no defence except in His name, who kept His laws and humbled their hearts before Him, believing in the Messiah and truly reverencing Him, men who had been led into the truth so that their faces shone'.⁶⁷ He continues to quote from the Qur'an, starting with the famous Q 2:256 ('no compulsion in religion') and ending with Q 29:46 ('Do not dispute with the People of the Book except with what is better') (also Q 3:20; 2:253b; 109:6).⁶⁸

Platti suggests that here the author is making his Christian character ask his Muslim interlocutor to drive the theory of abrogation in the opposite direction from Muslim dogma: that they let peaceful verses like 'no compulsion in religion' abrogate the violent verses.⁶⁹ He knows the Qur'an well enough to be familiar with the commands to fight and kill (he quotes from Q 9:29, the *jizya* verse). He says he has heard Jews say that the Qur'an is self-contradictory, but declines to say this himself. He is straightforward in his disapproval of the violence of Muḥammad as described in Muslim tradition, and he freely recommends the conduct and teachings of Jesus about responding to conflict. However, he chooses to highlight the peaceful verses in the Qur'an.

⁶⁴ Tien, 'Apology of al-Kindī', pp. 449-52.

⁶⁵ Tien, 'Apology of al-Kindī', pp. 391, 478.

⁶⁶ Tien, 'Apology of al-Kindī', p. 478.

⁶⁷ Tien, 'Apology of al-Kindī', p. 479.

⁶⁸ Tien, 'Apology of al-Kindī', p. 479.

⁶⁹ Platti, 'Abd al-Masīḥ al-Kindī', p. 69.

The Christian character's response here to his Muslim correspondent's summons to 'wage war in the way of Allāh'⁷⁰ indicates a possible distinguishing feature of Eastern Christian engagement with the Qur'an. All told, he evaluates the 'law' that he finds in Qur'an and *sunna*, challenges his opponent to favour peaceful verses over violent, and provides a striking contrast in the life and teachings of Jesus.⁷¹ This is significant because the part of the Eastern Church that had lived under Sasanian dominance prior to Islam had had no experience of combining the Christian faith with political power and force.

Intriguingly, Western scholars by and large do not seem to have given due acknowledgement to this important material in the *Risāla*. Samir Khalil Samir, however, points out the theme of non-violence in *Fī tathlīth Allāh al-wāḥid*,⁷² which 'is almost entirely lacking' in the first translation of the document made by Margaret Gibson.⁷³ The work here portrays the Apostles of Christ as weak and poor and having no authority. 'They did not fight anybody, and they did not force the people [...]', Samir translates, suggesting that the text makes 'a discrete allusion as to how, right from their birth, Christianity and Islam spread: Christianity in a non-violent manner, while Islam in a violent way'. Samir also finds in the second part of the document 'a clear defence of non-violence in religious matters', adding that this theme would become very important in later Arab Christian apologetics.⁷⁴ To what extent, one wonders, in a document which quotes the Qur'an sparingly but uses qur'anic language to explain Christian meanings, could this theme be a reaction to qur'anic teachings about fighting?

Responding to Islamic claims for the Qur'an

The 'qualifications' of Muḥammad also depended on the status of the Qur'an. While they accuse the Bible of falsification or corruption, Muslims who feature in dialogues written by Christians are portrayed as confident in their claims for the Qur'an. While the questions raised in the Qur'an about Muḥammad performing miracles do not evoke examples

⁷⁰ Tien, 'Apology of al-Kindī', p. 391.

⁷¹ Tien, 'Apology of al-Kindī', pp. 481, 503-14.

⁷² Samir, 'Earliest Arab apology', pp. 102-4.

⁷³ Samir, 'Earliest Arab apology', p. 101. See Gibson, *An Arabic version of the Acts of the Apostles*, p. 15.

⁷⁴ Samir, 'Earliest Arab apology', pp. 102-4.

of miracles from him, with time Muslims began to claim that the Qur'an itself is a miracle.

Eastern Christian ways of evaluating the Qur'an include John of Damascus's comment that its contents are merely 'worthy of laughter',⁷⁵ and comprise nothing more than 'idle tales'.⁷⁶ Likewise, when the Patriarch Timothy is asked by al-Mahdī, 'Do you not believe that our book was given by God?', he replies indirectly that when God wished to abrogate the Mosaic law He confirmed by the signs and miracles of the Messiah and his Apostles that the words of the Gospel were from Him, 'but your book has not been confirmed by a single sign or miracle. Since signs and miracles are proofs of the will of God, the conclusion drawn from their absence in your book is well known to your majesty'.⁷⁷

The Muslim claim of the Qur'an's inimitability (*i'jāz*) seems to have received its formal articulation in the third and fourth centuries of the Islamic era, when it was connected with a series of 'challenge' (*taḥaddī*) verses in the Qur'an. Al-Kindī's *Risāla* actually quotes two of these verses, which may be represented by Q 2:23, 'If you are in doubt about what we have sent down on our servant, then bring a *sūra* like it, and call your witnesses, other than Allāh, if you are truthful' (also Q 17:88; cf. 10:38; 11:13; 28:49; 52:34).⁷⁸ What follows is a remarkable response to this challenge.⁷⁹

As Andrew Rippin observes about this, the Muslim claim about the Qur'an's inimitability is a dogmatic argument that operates 'within the presuppositions of Islam alone'.⁸⁰ The advantage of the author of the *Risāla* was that he (assuming he speaks personally through the character of al-Kindī) had an excellent mother-tongue knowledge of Arabic⁸¹ and was also 'versed in textual criticism'.⁸² He thus addresses the overall form of the Qur'an, showing what seems to be an intimate familiarity with the text and confidently appealing to the same knowledge in his Muslim correspondent.⁸³ On the basis of this, he asserts that the Qur'an 'is loosely

⁷⁵ Sahas, *John of Damascus*, pp. 133, 141.

⁷⁶ Sahas, *John of Damascus*, pp. 137, 141.

⁷⁷ Mingana, 'Apology of Timothy', p. 173.

⁷⁸ Tien, 'Apology of al-Kindī', pp. 452-3.

⁷⁹ Tien, 'Apology of al-Kindī', pp. 452-70. Muir, *Apology of al-Kindī*, pp. 22-33.

⁸⁰ A. Rippin, *Muslims. Their religious beliefs and practices*, London, 2001², p. 34.

⁸¹ Tien, 'Apology of al-Kindī', pp. 463, 489. See also Clare Wilde's comparison of al-Kindī's ability with that of Theodore Abū Qurra and other Christian Arabic writers, 'Is there room for corruption in the "books" of God?', in D. Thomas (ed.), *The Bible in Arab Christianity*, Leiden, 2007, 225-40, pp. 235-6.

⁸² Tien, 'Apology of al-Kindī', p. 460.

⁸³ Tien, 'Apology of al-Kindī', pp. 458-9.

put together often without any meaning, and that again and again it contradicts itself.⁸⁴

The *Risāla* also deals with the Muslim claim that the vocabulary of the Qur'an is especially rich. The Christian notes that every nation considers its own language rich and beautiful, and then he questions the presence of the many foreign words in the Qur'an. If Arabic is such a special language, he asks, why does the Qur'an 'borrow' words from other languages when Arabic equivalents are available and used in other Arabic writings?⁸⁵ He quotes Q 12:2, 'We have sent it down as an Arabic Qur'an' (one in a series of verses that draw attention to the Arabic nature of the recitation; also Q 20:113; 39:28; 41:3; 43:3), evidently to query this special claim for Arabic. He also compares the Qur'anic style unfavourably with the great pre-Islamic Arab poets, saying the Qur'an 'is broken in its style, hybrid in its diction and, while high-sounding, often destitute of meaning'.⁸⁶ Examining this argument, Rippin observes, 'The literary state of the Qur'ān is used against the Muslims by al-Kindī as proof of its non-divine origin.'⁸⁷

'What ignorance could be more dense than his who appeals to such a book as evidence and proof that its author was a prophet sent by God?'⁸⁸ Al-Kindī's question to his correspondent may well be seen as rude and insensitive by today's standards of interfaith dialogue. But for the author and the church he represented the stakes were high. Those who ruled over them were claiming that the Qur'an was a miracle of language, and on that basis asserting the divine origin of the book, the prophethood of Muḥammad, and the truth of Islam. From a distance of centuries, the inimitability argument 'is difficult, if not impossible, to evaluate, due to the lack of contemporaneous profane literature by which the rhetorical accomplishment of the Qur'ān can actually be assessed'.⁸⁹ Who today is as close to the claim as was this Christian author? Sandra Keating suggests that the strength of the arguments of al-Kindī and perhaps other Eastern Christians may be reflected in Muslim laws that banned Christians from owning a Qur'an or teaching it to their children. 'Limited

⁸⁴ Tien, 'Apology of al-Kindī', p. 459.

⁸⁵ Tien, 'Apology of al-Kindī', pp. 460-1; S.T. Keating, 'Manipulation of the Qur'an in the epistolary exchange between al-Hāshimī and al-Kindī', in I.M. Beaumont (ed.), *Arab Christians and the Qur'an from the origins of Islam to the medieval period*, Leiden, 2018, 50-65, p. 62.

⁸⁶ Tien, 'Apology of al-Kindī', p. 461.

⁸⁷ Rippin, *Muslims*, p. 33.

⁸⁸ Tien, 'Apology of al-Kindī', p. 460.

⁸⁹ Rippin, *Muslims*, p. 34.

access to the text assured that non-believers could not use it to undermine settled teachings.⁹⁰

On the development of the Qur'an

Another apparently unique contribution to Eastern Christian engagement with the Qur'an is the section of the *Risāla* on the origin and history of the Qur'an.⁹¹ Griffith describes this passage as 'one of the earliest testimonies to the process of the Qur'an's canonization'.⁹² The *Risāla* claims to its Muslim correspondent, 'We have said nothing more than your own writings allow. We have confirmed nothing on our authority which is not confirmed by the traditions of your own scholars, men of weight among you.'⁹³ If dispassionate academic scholars can describe the traditional Muslim collection and canonisation stories as 'a mass of confusions, contradictions and inconsistencies',⁹⁴ and as transparently polemical,⁹⁵ why should an Arab Christian not discuss the traditions as he has heard them from Muslims in the earliest centuries of Islam?

The discussion in the *Risāla* features the same cast of characters that one meets in the Muslim traditions: Abū Bakr, 'Alī, Ibn Mas'ūd, Ubayy ibn Ka'b, 'Uthmān, Zayd ibn Thābit, Ibn 'Abbās, 'Umar. The author refers to the enmities between the first caliphs and queries the impact of their conflicts on the formation of the Qur'an.⁹⁶ He also refers to a number of characters who seem to appear less frequently in some modern non-Muslim summaries of the collection stories, among them Ḥajjāj ibn Yūsuf (d. 714), governor of Iraq under the Umayyad Caliph 'Abd al-Malik. The *Risāla* describes Ḥajjāj as gathering up all copies of the Qur'an that he could find, revising the text and deleting material, sending copies of the revised text to six cities in the Arab empire, then destroying all the

⁹⁰ Keating, 'Manipulation of the Qur'an', p. 63.

⁹¹ Tien, 'Apology of al-Kindi', pp. 452-70; Muir, *Apology of al-Kindi*, pp. 22-9.

⁹² Griffith, 'Prophet Muhammad, his scripture and his message', p. 144.

⁹³ Tien, 'Apology of al-Kindi', p. 459; Muir, *Apology of al-Kindi*, p. 29.

⁹⁴ J. Burton, *The collection of the Qur'an*, Cambridge, 1977, p. 140.

⁹⁵ Wansbrough, *Sectarian milieu*, p. 57. See also J. Wansbrough, *Quranic studies. Sources and methods of scriptural interpretation*, Oxford, 1977, p. 50.

⁹⁶ For comments by academic scholars who have recently pursued this and similar questions, see, for example, G. Böwering, art. 'Chronology and the Qur'an', in EQ; F.E. Peters, *The voice, the word, the books. The sacred scriptures of the Jews, Christians and Muslims*, Princeton NJ, 2007, p. 148; L.I. Conrad, 'Qur'anic studies. A historian's perspective', in M. Kropp (ed.), *Results of contemporary research on the Qur'an. The question of a historico-critical text*, Würzburg, 2007, 9-15, p. 12; C.F. Robinson, *'Abd al-Malik*, Oxford, 2005, p. 103.

earlier copies.⁹⁷ The *Risāla* is not alone in narrating this episode. Two other Eastern Christian works that make reference to the role of Ḥajjāj ibn Yūsuf in the collection of the Qur'an are the *Dispute of the monk Ibrāhīm al-Ṭabarānī*⁹⁸ and the correspondence between Leo III and 'Umar ibn 'Abd al-'Azīz.⁹⁹ Scholars who have continued to discuss the Ḥajjāj episode in recent decades include François Déroche,¹⁰⁰ Alfred-Louis de Prémare¹⁰¹ and Omar Hamdan.¹⁰² Al-Kindī's discussion of the history of the development of the Qur'an has been respectfully noted by scholars of the emergence of Islam and especially of qur'anic studies for more than a hundred years: Paul Casanova, Alphonse Mingana, Arthur Jeffery, John Wansbrough, Harald Motzki, Chase Robinson, Stephen Shoemaker, Nicolai Sinai.¹⁰³ Such scholars seem willing to consider evidence from any early sources, however characterised by others.

The *Risāla* suggests that inconsistencies arose in the Qur'an between material that came from different sources. It discusses variant readings between manuscripts, disagreements about the inclusion of certain short suras and the length of longer suras, and traditions about missing verses.¹⁰⁴ Such matters were openly and widely discussed in Muslim works at least until the *Al-itqān fī 'ulūm al-Qur'ān* of al-Suyūṭī (d. 1505). The *Risāla* uses these discussions to turn the Muslim accusation of biblical falsification back upon the Qur'an.¹⁰⁵ In so doing, it makes the point that the text of the Qur'an is incomplete and unreliable. Al-Kindī's conclusion is that 'there is no ground to have faith in the text transmitted in his [Muḥammad's] days'.¹⁰⁶

⁹⁷ Tien, 'Apology of al-Kindī', p. 459; Muir, *Apology of al-Kindī*, p. 28.

⁹⁸ K. Vollers, 'Das Religionsgespräch von Jerusalem (um 800 D); aus dem arabischen übersetzt', *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 29 (1908) 29-71, 197-221, p. 48.

⁹⁹ Jeffery, 'Ghevond's text', pp. 297-9, and p. 298 n. 48 for Arthur Jeffery's accompanying note on Ḥajjāj and several Muslim sources for this story.

¹⁰⁰ F. Déroche, *Qur'ans of the Umayyads*, Leiden, 2014, p. 72.

¹⁰¹ A.-L. de Prémare, 'Abd al-Malik b. Marwān et le processus de constitution du Coran', in K.-H. Ohlig and G.-R. Puin (eds), *Die dunklen Anfänge*, Berlin, 2007, 178-210.

¹⁰² O. Hamdan, 'The second maṣāḥif project. A step towards the canonization of the qur'anic text', in A. Neuwirth, N. Sinai and M. Marx (eds), *The Qur'ān in context. Historical and literary investigations into the qur'anic milieu*, Leiden, 2010, 794-835.

¹⁰³ G. Nickel, 'Scholarly reception of Alphonse Mingana's "The transmission of the Qur'ān". A centenary perspective', in D. Pratt et al. (eds), *The character of Christian-Muslim encounter*, Leiden, 2015, 343-64, pp. 347, 349, 353, 358, 361. See also Wilde, 'Is there room for corruption?', p. 232.

¹⁰⁴ Tien, 'Apology of al-Kindī', pp. 455-60; Muir, *Apology of al-Kindī*, pp. 25-8. Emilio Platti enumerates these helpfully in 'Abd al-Masīḥ al-Kindī', pp. 78-82.

¹⁰⁵ Keating, 'Manipulation of the Qur'an', pp. 54, 64.

¹⁰⁶ Platti, 'Abd al-Masīḥ al-Kindī', p. 81.

Characterisations of the legacy

Some of the scholarship on the literary legacy of Eastern Christianity has not only provided helpful description of the writings and their authors but has also characterised the writings in ways that would either recommend or discourage study of them.

When Griffith asked why scholars have paid so little attention to the vigorous engagement with the Qur'an in al-Kindī's *Risāla*, he suggested, 'Perhaps the polemical character of the text makes it suspect as an historical document.'¹⁰⁷ Actually, al-Kindī's discussion of the Qur'an has received the attention of key scholars of the history of the Qur'an's development for more than a hundred years, as shown above. But Griffith's suggested reason for neglect by others carries within it a challenge to scholars of Christian-Muslim relations. Arthur Jeffery also wrote in 1944 that al-Kindī's statements about the involvement of Ḥajjāj ibn Yūsuf in the collection of the Qur'an have 'been looked at askance as a piece of Christian polemic', but then went on to list a variety of early Muslim sources that tell the same story.¹⁰⁸ If this is true, why should scholars neglect 'one of the earliest testimonies to the process of the Qur'an's canonization'¹⁰⁹ because of a negative epithet?

Rippin has traced a comparable tendency in the academic study of the Qur'an and early Muslim writings, describing an 'irenic approach' in the discipline that aims towards 'the greater appreciation of Islamic religiousness and the fostering of a new attitude towards it'. He suggests this approach 'has led to the unfortunate result of a reluctance on the part of many scholars to follow all the way through with their insights and results'.¹¹⁰ Rippin was concerned with what he saw as the mixing of intellectual history with sociology. To what extent has the legacy of Eastern Christian engagement with the Qur'an been characterised according to the changing philosophical currents in interfaith relations?

A famous example of disparate characterisations of Eastern Christian engagement is the framing of the answer of Timothy I to the Caliph al-Mahdī's question in the course of their debate: 'What do you say about

¹⁰⁷ Griffith, 'Prophet Muhammad, his scripture and his message', p. 144.

¹⁰⁸ Jeffery, 'Ghevond's text,' p. 298 n. 48.

¹⁰⁹ Griffith, 'Prophet Muhammad, his scripture and his message', p. 144.

¹¹⁰ A. Rippin, 'Literary analysis of *Qur'ān*, *tafsīr*, and *sīra*. The methodologies of John Wansbrough', in R.C. Martin (ed.), *Approaches to Islam in religious studies*, Tucson AZ, 1985, 151-63, p. 159.

Muḥammad?’¹¹¹ David Kerr used Timothy’s answer to make a case for accepting the Muslim claim that Muḥammad was a prophet of God. He acknowledged the ambiguity of Timothy’s words but argued that they could still be used in ‘the modern search for irenic dialogue between Christianity and Islam’.¹¹² By contrast, Samir concludes from a careful study of the passage in the Arabic recension of the debate and its context that Timothy refuses to answer the question of Muḥammad’s prophethood positively.¹¹³ ‘Some Christian scholars have interpreted [Timothy’s answer] as a recognition of the prophethood of Muḥammad [...] [T]he meaning which is sometimes derived today from Timothy’s beautiful words *salaka fī sabīl al-anbiyā’* [‘he – Muḥammad – walked in the way of the prophets’] has nothing to do with Timothy’s own interpretation.’¹¹⁴

Appearances are not always what they seem. Characterisations of Eastern Christian works based on tone and style may lead to false evaluation. David Thomas writes insightfully about the approach of Paul of Antioch’s ‘Letter to a Muslim friend’, which generally agrees with the content of the Qur’an and even offers the possibility that Muḥammad was sent by God. Though outwardly peaceful, friendly and reasonable, the work ‘proves more provocative than any direct attack’.¹¹⁵ ‘Paul’s *Letter* can only have outraged Muslims by the implicitly arrogant manner in which it shuts out any alternatives to the views it states’, Thomas suggests.¹¹⁶ The letter and its revised and extended version in the ‘Letter from the people of Cyprus’ drew ‘some of the most substantial and intransigent refutations ever produced by Muslim authors’,¹¹⁷ including al-Qarāfī (d. 1285),¹¹⁸ Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328)¹¹⁹ and Ibn Abī Ṭālib al-Dimashqī (d. 1327).¹²⁰ We know of no formal Muslim responses to al-Kindī’s *Risāla*, but is it possible

¹¹¹ Mingana, ‘Apology of Timothy’, p. 197.

¹¹² D.A. Kerr, ‘He walked in the path of the prophets’. Toward Christian theological recognition of the prophethood of Muhammad’, in Y.Y. Haddad and W.Z. Haddad (eds), *Christian-Muslim Encounters*, Gainesville FL, 1995, 426–46, p. 426.

¹¹³ S.K. Samir, ‘The Prophet Muḥammad as seen by Timothy I and other Arab Christian authors’, in D. Thomas (ed.), *Syrian Christians under Islam*, Leiden, 2001, 75–106, p. 96.

¹¹⁴ Samir, ‘Prophet Muḥammad’, pp. 96, 105.

¹¹⁵ Thomas, ‘Paul of Antioch’s *Letter*’, p. 205.

¹¹⁶ Thomas, ‘Paul of Antioch’s *Letter*’, p. 211.

¹¹⁷ D. Thomas, ‘*Risāla ilā baʿḍ aṣḍiqāʾihi alladhīna bi-Ṣaydā min al-Muslimīn*’, in *CMR* 4, 79–82.

¹¹⁸ M. El Kaisy-Friemuth, ‘Al-Qarāfī’, in *CMR* 4, 582–7.

¹¹⁹ J. Hoover, ‘Ibn Taymiyya’, in *CMR* 4, 824–78, and J. Hoover, ‘The correct answer to those who have changed the religion of Christ’, in *CMR* 4, 834–44.

¹²⁰ D. Thomas, ‘Ibn Abī Ṭālib al-Dimashqī’, in *CMR* 4, 798–801.

that the author knew something about 'friendly strife' in interfaith conversation that does not seem apparent on the surface?

Regarding al-Kindī's *Risāla*, in recent years a number of scholars have been drawing attention to the value of the work. Platti notes that the author discussed Muslim traditions about the collection and canonisation of the Qur'an prior to the writing down of these traditions by Muslim authors in the great works of Hadith; therefore, he asserts, the author's early material 'should be included in any research on the collection of the Qur'an'.¹²¹ Keating remarks on the extensive and accurate knowledge of the Qur'an demonstrated in the *Risāla*, 'rarely found in Christian writings from this period, even when it may be hinted at'.¹²² Clare Wilde queries the significance of quotations from the Qur'an in early Christian Arab works such as this for the history of the development of the text of the Qur'an.¹²³ Wilde also gazes provocatively in the direction of Eastern Christianity: 'Rather than dismissing al-Kindī's text as unfit for insight into the *i'jāz al-Qur'ān* debate due to its patronizing and polemical tone, Islamicists may want to examine the Arabness of his defense of Christianity more closely – especially in the light of other contemporary polemics within the Islamic world.'¹²⁴

Like the erection of the Dome of the Rock upon the Temple Mount in sight of a Christian Jerusalem, the Qur'an with its affirmations, denials and insistent claims confronted the Christian communities of the Middle East with overwhelming force and presence. Beautiful in its standardisation of a new language, though a language foreign to most Christians, the Qur'an's greatest challenges came from the contents between the covers. Those challenges penetrated into the deepest convictions of the vanquished communities and drew out of those who dared many remarkable, and often courageous, expressions.

The legacy of Eastern Christianity's engagement with the Qur'an, as seen through surviving documents, is a treasure for the entire global Church, especially Christians who relate on a daily basis to Muslims in Muslim-majority societies. 'For the Arab Christian writers were honest with themselves and with their religion', writes Samir.¹²⁵ Christians in

¹²¹ Platti, 'Abd al-Masīḥ al-Kindī', p. 82, cf. pp. 71-7.

¹²² Keating, 'Manipulation of the Qur'an', p. 56.

¹²³ C. Wilde, 'Early Christian Arabic texts. Evidence for non-'Uthmānic Qur'ān codices, or early approaches to the Qur'ān?', in G.S. Reynolds (ed.), *New perspectives on the Qur'ān. The Qur'ān in its historical context* 2, London, 2011, 358-71, pp. 362-3.

¹²⁴ Wilde, 'Is there room for corruption?', p. 237.

¹²⁵ Samir, 'Prophet Muḥammad', p. 106.

Muslim contexts will probably value the legacy differently from Western scholars who have made commitments to various current philosophies of religious difference. Most regions of Latin Christianity have never experienced the kinds of circumstances that produced the Eastern Christian writings. We therefore read these writings with sympathetic and grateful appreciation.